

Telephone conversation between President Kennedy and Governor Ross Barnett

September 29, 1962, 2:00 P.M.

President Kennedy: Hello? Hello, Governor?

Governor Barnett: All right. Yes.

JFK: How are you?

RB: Is this . . .

JFK: This is the president, uh . . .

RB: Oh. Well, Mr. President, [words unintelligible].

JFK: Well, I'm glad to talk to you, Governor. I am concerned about, uh, this situation, uh, down there, as I know, uh . . .

RB: Oh, I should say I am concerned about it, Mr. President. It's, it's, it's a horrible situation.

JFK: Well, now, here's my problem Governor.

RB: [Words unintelligible, interrupting] Yes.

JFK: This, uh, listen, I didn't, uh, put him in the university, but on the other hand, under the Constitution, I have to carry out the orders of the, carry that order out and I don't, I get, uh, I don't want to do it in any way that causes, uh, difficulty to you or to anyone else. But I've got to do it. Now, I'd like to get your help in doing that.

RB: Yes. Well, uh, have you talked with, uh, attorney general this morning?

JFK: Yeah. I talked to him and, uh, in fact, I just met with him for about an hour, and we went over the situation.

RB: Uh, did he and Mr. Watkins have a talk this morning? Tom Watkins, the lawyer from Jackson, or not?

JFK: Uh, yes, he talked to Tom Watkins. He told me.

RB: Yes, sir. Well, I don't know what. . . Well, I don't know what uh, I haven't had a chance to talk with him.

JFK: Now just wait just one minute, because I've got the attorney general in the outer office, and I'll just speak to him.

RB: All right.

(Governor Barnett put on hold)

JFK: Hello, uh, Governor?

RB: Yes. Hold on . . .

JFK: I just talked to the attorney general. Now, he said that he talked to Mr. Watkins, and the problem is as to whether we can get, uh, the, we can get some help in getting this fellow in, uh, this week.

RB: Yes.

JFK: Now, evidently we couldn't, the attorney general didn't feel that, uh, he and Mr. Watkins had reached any final agreement on that.

RB: Well, uh, Mr. President, Mr. Watkins is going to fly up there early tomorrow morning.

JFK: Right.

RB: And, uh, could you gentlemen talk with him tomorrow? You . . .

JFK: Yes, I will have the attorney general talk to him and then, uh ...

RB: Yes.

JFK: . . . after they've finished talking I'll talk to the attorney general, on the phone and then if he feels it's useful for me to meet with him . . .

RB: I thought . . .

JFK: . . . I'll do that

RB: I thought they were making some progress. I didn't know.

JFK: Well, now, he and, if he and Mr. Watkins, they can meet tomorrow. Now, the difficulty is, uh, we got two or three problems. In the first place, what can we do to, uh, what can we do to uh . . . First place is the court's order to you, which I guess is, you're given until Tuesday. What is

your feeling on that?

RB: Well, I want . . .

JFK: What's your position on that?

RB: . . . to think it over, Mr. President.

JFK: Right.

RB: Uh, it, it's a serious matter, now I want to think it over a few days. Until Tuesday, anyway.

JFK: Alright. Well, now let me, let me say this, uh . . .

RB: .I know what I am up against, Mr. President. I took an oath, you know, to abide by the laws of this state . . .

JFK: That's right.

RB: . . . and our constitution here and the Constitution of the United States. I'm, I'm on the spot here, you know.

JFK: Well, now you've got, uh . . .

RB: I, I've taken an oath to do that, and you know what our laws are with reference to . . .

JFK: Yes, I understand that. Well, now we've got the . . .

RB: . . . we have a statute that was enacted a couple of weeks ago stating positively that no one who had been convicted of a crime or, uh, whether the criminal action pending against them would not be eligible for any of the institutions of higher learning. And, uh, that's our law, and it seemed like the Court of Appeal didn't pay any attention to that.

JFK: Right. Well, of course, the problem is, Governor, that, uh, I got my responsibility, just like you have yours . . .

RB: Well, that's true. I . . .

JFK: . . . and my responsibility, of course, is to the . . .

RB: . . . I realize that, and I appreciate that so much.

JFK: Well, now here's the thing, uh, Governor, I will, uh, the attorney general can talk to, uh,

Mr. Watkins tomorrow. What I want, would like to do is to try to work this out in an amicable way. We don't want a lot of people down there getting hurt . . .

RB: Oh, that's right.

JFK: --and we don't want to have a -- You know it's very easy to-

RB: Mr. President, let me say this. They're calling, calling me and others from all over the state, wanting to bring a thousand, wanting to bring five hundred, and two hundred, and all such as that, you know.

JFK: I know, well the . . .

RB: We don't want such as that.

JFK: I know. Well, we don't want to have a, we don't want to have a lot of people getting hurt or killed down there.

RB: Why, that's, that's correct. Uh, Mr. President, let me say this. Mr. Watkins is really an A-1 lawyer, an honorable man, has the respect and the confidence of every lawyer in America who knows him. He's of the law firm of Watkins & Eager. They have, they've had an "A" rating for many, many years, and, uh, uh, I believe this, that that he can help solve this problem.

JFK: Well, I will, uh, the attorney general will see Mr. Watkins tomorrow, and then I, after the attorney general and Mr. Watkins are finished then, uh, I will be back in touch with you.

RB: All right. All right. I'll appreciate it so much, now, and, uh, there . . . Watkins'll leave here in the morning, and I'll have him to get into touch with the, uh, attorney general as to when they, he, he can see him tomorrow.

JFK: Yeah, he'll see him and, uh . . .

RB: Yes, sir.

JFK: . . . we will, uh, then you and I'll be back and talk again.

RB: All right.

JFK: Thank you.

RB: All right.

JFK: Okay.

RB: I appreciate your interest in our poultry program and all those things.

JFK: Well, we're . . .

RB: Thank you so much.

JFK: Okay, Governor. Thank you.

RB: Yes, sir. All right now.

JFK: Bye now.

President Kennedy talks to Governor Ross Barnett

September 29, 1962, 3:00 P.M. (continuing a conversation started by Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Barnett)

President Kennedy: Governor, this is the President speaking.

Governor Barnett: Yes, sir.

JFK: Now it's, I know that your feeling about the law of Mississippi and the fact that you don't want to carry out that court order. What we really want to have from you, though, is some understanding about whether the state police will maintain law and order. We understand your feeling about the court order and your disagreement with it. But what we're concerned about is how much violence is going to be and what kind of action we'll have to take to prevent it. And I'd like to get assurances from you that the state police down there will take positive action to maintain law and order. Then we'll know what we have to do.

RB: They'll, they'll take positive action, Mr. President, to maintain law and order as best we can.

JFK: And now, how good is--

RB: [interrupting] We'll have 220 highway patrolmen--

JFK: Right.

RB: --and they'll absolutely be unarmed.

RB: Not a one of them'll be armed.

JFK: Well, the problem is, well, what can they do to maintain law and order and prevent the gathering of a mob and action taken by the mob? What can they do? Can they stop that?

RB: Well, they'll do their best to. They'll do everything in their power to stop it.

JFK: Now, what about the suggestions made by the Attorney General in regard to not permitting people to congregate and start a mob?

RB: Well, we'll do our best to, to keep them from congregating, but that's hard to do, you know.

JFK: Well, they just tell them to move along.

RB: When they start moving up on the sidewalks and different sides of the streets, what are you going to do about it?

JFK: Well, now, as I understand it, Governor, you would do everything you can to maintain law and order.

RB: I, I, I'll do everything in my power to maintain order--

JFK: Right. Now--

RB: --and peace. We don't want any shooting down here.

JFK: I understand. Now, Governor, what about, can you maintain this order?

RB: Well, I don't know.

RB: That's what I'm worried about you see. I don't know whether I can or not.

JFK: Right.

RB: I couldn't have the other afternoon. There was such a mob there, it would have been impossible. There were men in there with trucks and shotguns, and all such as that. Not a lot of them, but some, we saw, and certain people were just, they were just enraged.

JFK: Well, now, will you talk--

RB: You just don't understand the situation down here.

JFK: Well, the only thing is I got my responsibility.

RB: I know you do.

JFK: This is not my order, I just have to carry it out. So I want to get together and try to do it with you in a way, which is the most satisfactory and causes the least chance of damage to people in Mississippi. That's my interest.

RB: That's right. Would you be willing to wait awhile and let the people cool off on the whole thing?

JFK: Until how long?

RB: Couldn't you make a statement to the effect, Mr. President, Mr. General, that under the circumstances existing in Mississippi, that, uh, there'll be bloodshed; you want to protect the life of, of, of James Meredith and all other people? And under the circumstances at this time, it just wouldn't be fair to him or others to try to register him at this time.

JFK: Well, then at what time would it be fair?

RB: Well, we, we could wait a, I don't know. It might be in, uh, two or three weeks, it might cool off a little.

JFK: Well, would you undertake to register him in two weeks?

RB: Well, I, you know I can't undertake to register him myself--

JFK: I see.

RB: --but you all might make some progress that way, you know.

JFK: Yeah. Well, we'd be faced with, unless we had your support and assurance, we'd be--

RB: I say I'm going to, I'm going to cooperate. I might not know when you're going to register him, you know.

JFK: I see. Well, now, Governor, why don't, do you want to talk to Mr. Watkins?

RB: I might not know that, what your plans were, you see.

JFK: Do you want to, do you want to talk to Mr. Watkins then?

RB: I'll be delighted to talk to him, and we'll call you back.

JFK: Okay, good.

RB: Call the general back?

JFK: Yeah, call the general, and then I'll be around.

RB: All right. I appreciate it so much.

JFK: Thanks, Governor.

RB: I thank you for this call.

JFK: Thank you, Governor.

RB: All right.

JFK: Right.

RB: Bye.

Telephone conversation between President Kennedy and Governor Ross Barnett.

Sunday, September 30, 1962, Midnight

President Kennedy: Well, we can't consider moving Meredith as long as, you know, there's a riot outside, 'cause he wouldn't be safe.

Governor Barnett: Sir?

JFK: We couldn't consider moving Meredith if you -- if we haven't been able to restore order outside. That's the problem, Governor.

RB: Well, uh, I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr. President. I'll go up there myself--

JFK: Well, now, how long will it take you to get there?

RB: --and I'll get a microphone and tell 'em that uh, you have agreed for him to be removed.

JFK: No. No. Now, wait a minute. How long--Wait a minute, Governor. Now, how long is it going to take you to get up there?

RB: 'Bout an hour.

JFK: Now, I'll tell you what you- if you want to go up there and then you call me from up there. Then we'll decide what we're gonna do before you make any speeches about it.

RB: Well, all right.

JFK: No sense in, uh...

RB: ...I mean, whatever you, if you'd authorize...

JFK: You see, if we don't, we got an hour to go, and that's not, uh, we may not have an hour.

RB: Uh, this, this man--

JFK: Won't it take you an hour to get up there?

RB: --this man has just died.

JFK: Did he die?

RB: Yes.

JFK: Which one? State police?

RB: A state policeman.

JFK: Yeah, well, you see, we gotta get order up there, and that's what we thought we're going to have.

RB: Mr. President, please. Why don't you, uh, can't you give an order up there to remove Meredith?

JFK: How can I remove him, Governor, when there's a riot in the street, and he may step out of that building and something happen to him? I can't remove him under those conditions.

RB: Uh, but, but--

JFK: Let's get order up there, then we can do something about Meredith.

RB: We can surround it with plenty of officials.

JFK: Well, we've gotta get somebody up there now to get order and stop the firing and the

shooting. Then when, you and and I will talk on the phone about Meredith. But first we've got to get order.

RB: I'll call and tell them to get every official they can.

JFK: That's right, then you and I will talk. When they've got order there, then you and I will talk about what's the best thing to do about Meredith.

RB: All right then.

JFK: Well, thank you.

RB: All right.